

Pilgrims show solidarity with Palestinians

The tour bus full of Christian pilgrims came to a halt. Unlike the usual Holy Land circuit, this group wasn't visiting an historic church or antiquities site. Instead, they had come to observe the scene outside the east Jerusalem branch of the Israeli Ministry of Interior, where a cluster of Palestinians huddled in the rain.

Douglas Dicks, a Virginia-born outreach worker for Catholic Relief Services, stood up in the front of the bus, pointed to the building and began reading from the Gospel of Matthew, describing Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. "And when Pilate saw a riot was gathering, he took some water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility," intoned Dicks.

The tour, billed as a trip along a modern-day "Via Dolorosa," aimed to illustrate the everyday indignities Jerusalem's Palestinian residents suffer at the hands of Israeli authorities in the city of their birth. It was part of an ecumenical Christian conference on the Palestinian issue in late February.

The conference was sponsored by the Jerusalem-based Sabeel, a center for Christian liberation theology. It brought together several hundred Christians from 17 countries around the world to consider anew the Palestinian plight, particularly in the wake of failed Middle East peace talks.

"Palestinians come to the Ministry of Interior building to renew their Jerusalem residency permits, to get permits for their children, to get permission to leave the country and to re-enter," Dicks said. But a whole range of Israeli administrative policies, beginning at the entrance to the ministry office, make it difficult for Palestinians to obtain, or hold on to, Jerusalem residency rights, he said, and that has resulted in the de facto expulsion of thousands of Arab residents from the city.

"You always find people standing here for hours, in the rain and shine. Just to get into the building, people start lining up at 3 in the morning," said Dicks. "It's all part of the 'quiet' deportation policy."

The discrimination against Palestinians in Jerusalem was just one of the many Palestinian human rights issues that the conference sought to highlight not only through the "alternative" tours of Jerusalem, but also in visits to churches, refugee camps and urban social welfare centers in the West Bank. Along the way, the group got a little taste of what it might feel like to be a Palestinian under Israeli rule these days.

One day, for instance, about 200 members of the group stood at an Israeli roadblock at the entrance to Ramallah for 90 minutes, waiting for permission to enter the city. The long wait, many participants later said, was a firsthand experience with the maze of obstacles Palestinians face in trying to move through the checkerboard of West Bank Israeli and Palestinian enclaves for work or worship, family visits or health-care access.

"I thought it was a very powerful statement, for all of us to get out of our buses and remain steadfast in the insistence that we would cross the roadblock," said Don Wagner, a professor at Chicago's North Park University. Wagner, a frequent visitor to the region, is the author of a just-published book on Palestinian Christians titled *Dying in the Holy Land*.

In the view of key conference participants, the blame for the peace process's collapse rests squarely on Israeli shoulders. Israel's recent offers to the Pales-

tinians to relinquish some 80 to 90 percent of the West Bank and parts of Jerusalem, however far-reaching, didn't go far enough, they said. Israel failed to offer a blueprint for a really viable Palestinian state or a realistic plan for the return of the nearly 4 million Palestinian refugees living in the Arab world.

"You can't deny that the state of Israel exists. But I also don't think that there is any denying either that the state of Israel is responsible for creating the refugee situation," said Liz Peel, an American-born doctoral student in media and theology at Edinburgh University, an informal spokesperson for the conference.

"The West Bank is only 22 percent of mandatory Palestine, and the Palestinians were only offered 80 to 90 percent of the West Bank in the recent negotiations," added Betsy Barlow of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who heads the U.S.-based arm of the Sabeel Center. "Israel would still have maintained its matrix of control, with the settlements and the bypass roads. And this wouldn't have led to real peace," she said.

Barlow said she underwent a transformation from being a relatively avid supporter of Israel earlier in her life to becoming a critic of the Zionist state after encountering the Palestinian refugee problem as a teacher in Beirut, Lebanon, in the 1950s. —Elaine Ruth Fletcher, RNS

Jewish leaders stress support for Israel

A delegation of major American Jewish leaders ended a four-day solidarity visit to Israel after declaring that support for the Jewish state remains strong, despite the recent failures of the peace process.

"We have come to show our solidarity with the people and government of Israel, and to send a message that violence and terrorism will not deter us," declared Ronald S. Lauder, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, at a February 22 press briefing in Jerusalem. "The Palestinians must understand that the violence must stop, and it is the re-

sponsibility of Chairman Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority who are inciting the violence to bring it to an end," Lauder said.

Backing for Israel is very high among American Jews right now, added Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the organization, citing recent polls. "The *intifada* has the added dimension of being a war waged against the entire Jewish people, not just against Israel," he said. The visiting delegation included more than 100 leaders of the 54 Jewish organizations that are members of the umbrella group. —RNS